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ABSTRACT

Fifty picture storybooks found on the 1979 Classroom Choices list (a compilation of children's favorite titles) were analyzed to find out what structural characteristics children preferred. A taxonomy developed by Gayle Palmer and Jadzia Nakonechny was used to categorize the books. The analysis reveals the following children's preferences: books in which main characters confront a problem and seek a solution; plots that are episodic, revealing the stories incident by incident; plots that focus on characters with different points of view or characters who experience the same thing in contrasting ways; fantasy as the preferred genre, followed by realistic fiction and folktales; books that give animals human qualities; books that contain humorous characters and situations; and books by Tomie De Paola, who has had more books on the Classroom Choices list during 1978 and 1979 than any other author/illustrator. (RL)

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CHILDREN'S FAVORITE PICTURE STORYBOOKS:

AN ANALYSIS OF STRUCTURE AND READING PREFERENCES

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If a good reading program has as its main goal the creation of an enthusiastic lifelong reader and if the focus of a good elementary school literature program is the child, then any list of books that children pick as their favorites needs to be carefully looked at by those who teach reading and literature in the elementary grades. The Classroom Choices list is such a compilation of children's favorite titles. Each year a national sampling of students gets a chance to read a large selection of children's books published during the previous calendar year. The children's choices are tallied by team leaders across the United States and the result is a yearly list published jointly by the Children's Book Council and International Reading Association.

For teachers who are concerned with providing books that children will enjoy, this list is invaluable. To know that a national sampling of youngsters has chosen a certain book is a very powerful piece of information to have before sharing or suggesting that a child read a particular book. As teachers, each time we recommend books to our students, we put our reputations on the line. When we strike out by suggesting a title that a child finds uninteresting, the chances get greater each time that the child will not consult the teacher and when that happens we lose our best method for reading guidance.

Teachers ought to be constantly asking what do children like to read? What do they expect from books? What better place to look for the answers to these two questions than the Classroom Choices list for 1979. A careful analysis of the books on this list provides educators with a yearly update

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on the reading preferences of a large sampling of school-age youngsters.

Typically, when any list of children's books is analyzed, the researcher categorizes the books and the list is fractionized into a counting of so many books about death, so many about space travel, so many with female main characters, and so forth. The ways of categorizing are endless. I believe this type of analysis proves interesting and does give us another answer to the question of what children like to read (in fact, I do this later in this study), but it is perhaps not the best, or at least, the total answer to the reading preference question.

For a number of years, researchers have attempted to classify children's books according to plot structure. Researchers like Favat (1977) and White (1975) have argued that two books may both be about horses and yet be very different in terms of plot structure and that perhaps it is the plot structure that appeals to the child and not the subject of horses (for a more detailed explanation see Abrahamson 1978). On a theoretical level, many would agree with the idea that plot structure may play an important part in why a child chooses a particular book. The problem has always been how to analyze/categorize books according to different literary structures. It is the system of categorizing not the idea, that has been the problem.

The purpose of this study was to analyze a sampling of 50 picture storybooks found on the 1979 Classroom Choices list in an attempt to find out what structural commonalities children seemed to be choosing in 1979. The first problem, alluded to above, was the search for an instrument to help in this categorizing according to story structure.

Propp's system discussed in Favat (1977) proved applicable only to the

folktales in the sample, so it was discarded. My research assistants and I then tried Mary Lou White's system as presented in "A Structural Description of Picture Storybooks" (1975). Working separately using White's system we found the categories to be too general and subjective to arrive at any type of agreement. The system we found most useful was developed by Gayle Palmer and Jadzia Nakonechny and borrows from the work of Northop Frye, Mary Lou White, and Sam Sebesta. Here is their composite instrument.

Picture Storybook Plot Structure Instrument

1. Confrontation with a problem--The character(s) meet a problem that definitely requires a solution. The characters perceive the situation or dilemmas as a problem and find a solution to it.

2. Contrast--Characters have opposing points of view, come from contrasting settings or meet contrasting adventures, or experience the same thing in contrasting ways.

3. Episodic--Incident after incident reveals the plot by relating the adventures of the characters.

4. Origin story--The plot gives an explanation of some observed phenomenon.

5. Plotless--This becomes a catch-all for such books as alphabet, nonfiction, books with no real plot.

6. Quest or aspiration story--This involves a character or character's search for knowledge about himself or herself and the world around him or her. It may be learning a new skill or discovering the reason for a particular feeling. It does not involve a problem and subsequent solution.

7. Story collections--This became necessary in categorizing books in which central characters are featured in two or more discrete stories: examples are Frog and Toad, Witch Goblin and Sometimes Ghost.

8. Travel story--Character embarks on a journey away from home

and encounters an adventure or series of adventures, undergoes the experiences, either overcomes the difficulty or is overcome by it.

Of course, some stories combine types described in the instrument. A quest story may also be a travel story; in this case, the quest motif prevails. Likewise, a confrontation prevails over travel. Travel prevails over episodic. (Sebesta, 1978, p.6)

Palmer and Nakonechny used this taxonomy to analyze a sampling of picture storybooks published during 1975 and 76. The results were reported in an unpublished research study (Sebesta 1978). Two research assistants and I used these earlier books as practice in working with the story structure instrument. After independently categorizing and then discussing the structure of 20 or these books we felt ready to analyze the 50 picture storybook sample from the 1979 list. Each of us categorized the 50 books independently. In sharing our results, we were pleased with 92% agreement on how we classified the story structure of each book.

The following table indicates book titles and story structure categories along with percentages to indicate the most popular story structures for 1979.

Results - Story Structure Analysis

CONFRONTATION (28% of Sample)	EPISODIC (24% of Sample)
Arion and the Dolphins Bad Luck Tony A Big Fat Enormous Lie Bill and Pete Chester Chipmunk's Thanksgiving Cloudy With A Chance of Meatballs The Frog Band and Durrington Dormouse Jeremy Isn't Hungry Mr. and Mrs. Button's Wonderful Watchdogs A Pocket for Corduroy Rum Pum Pum Socks For Supper The Wounded Wolf Wriggles, The Little Wishing Pig	Albert's Story Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday The Best Burglar Alarm Dracula's Cat George the Babysitter Mouse Six and the Happy Birthday Ms. Glee Was Waiting Oh, Were They Ever Happy The Pancake The Stupids Have A Ball Taxi Dog Where Did My Mother Go
CONTRAST (16% of Sample)	**PLOTLESS (12% of Sample)**
Brothers Are All The Same Cinderella His Mother's Dog Jenny and the Tennis Nut John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat Morris Has A Cold Mouse and Tim The Worst Person In The World	The Farmer In The Dell Gregory Griggs and Other Nursery Rhyme People A House Is a House For Me Robbers, Bones and Mean Dogs Small Worlds Close Up Snake In, Snake Out
TRAVEL (8% of Sample)	**QUEST (6% of Sample)**
The Bearskinner Bus Ride The Snake: A Very Long Story The Trip	Arthur's Prize Reader Beauty and The Beast Captain Toad and the Motorbike
STORY COLLECTIONS (4% of Sample)	**ORIGIN STORIES (2% of Sample)**
Four Scarey Stories George and Martha One Fine Day	The Tortoise and the Tree

As the table indicates, a national sampling of children in 1979 has chosen picture storybooks with the following plot structures: a character's confrontation with a problem and his solution to it, a story that unfolds incident after incident, and characters who have opposing points of view or experience the same thing in contrasting ways.

There are some interesting points to consider in regard to these findings. When literature programs are defended in the elementary school, one often hears that literature provides children with different ways to attack or solve a problem and that literature allows children to vicariously walk in someone else's shoes and develop some sense of how other people experience things-to move children from a totally ego-centered world. Our findings indicate that children do find enjoyment in books where characters confront and solve problems and they also enjoy reading books in which characters react very differently to the same set of happenings. Here is a classic example of our educational objectives matching what children want and expect from literature. Finally, one can't help but speculate about the influence of television on reading preferences. The vast majority of TV shows involve a character trying to solve a problem usually told in an episodic manner. It would be interesting to categorize television scripts using the same instrument.

Certainly there are other ways in which this sampling of picture storybooks can be analyzed to help teachers answer the question of what children like to read. We've looked at plot structure, now let's consider other commonalities.

Eight of the 50 books are retellings of folktales or illustrated

versions of folk songs. Undoutbtedly this group of books included some of the most beautiful full color illustrations in the sample. From Mercer Mayer's gorgeous detailed paintings in Beauty and the Beast to the late Felix Hoffman's preliminary color studies and brush drawings in The Bearskinner, this category contains some of the most respected names in juvenile book illustration such as Paul Galdone, Jose Aruego, and Adrienne Adams. The books represent a mixture of well known tales such as Galdone's Cinderella or Zuromskis' The Farmer in the Dell and lesser known stories such as the Bantu folktale The Tortoise and the Tree adapted and illustrated by Janina Domanska.

Realistic fiction made up 24% of the sampling. Within this grouping we find two single parent families, an adopted child, two books about new babies in the family, and a collection of characters who confront problems as varied as the guilt of lying to the difficult task of trying to save money. Although these books deal with very significant problems, it is refreshing to see some of the best humor within the classfication of picture storybooks. Marjorie Sharmat's A Big Fat Enormous Lie brings humor to that universal feeling of guilt that follows the telling of a lie. Janet Schulman writes a funny easy reader that tackles a very important problem. In Jenny and the Tennis Nut, the main character wants to be a gymnast while her father wants her to be a tennis player like him. Jenny handles the problem good naturedly and eventually gets her father to see that tennis is his game not hers.

As might be expected in a sampling of picture storybooks, the majority were in the fantasy genre. Fully 50% of the books contained fastastic

elements of some sort. Fourteen of the books had animals with human qualities as main characters or, at least, as integral characters in the story. Dogs were the most frequent animal depicted followed by mice, frogs, and cats.

Humor enjoys an important place within this fantasy grouping as well. The offbeat humor of James Marshall is popular as exemplified by his George and Martha One Fine Day and The Stupids Have a Ball. A book equal in its outrageous situations is the story about a town where it rains food, Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs. David McPhail's beautiful Captain Toad and the Motorbike is bound to be a special favorite because of the humor and the subject of motorbikes. It also provides a good chance for teachers to call attention to a similarly adventurous toad in The Wind in the Willows.

In working with any list of children's favorites, it is always worth noting which authors or illustrators are chosen by children most often. The illustrator/author with the most books on the 1979 list is especially significant because he had the most books on the 1978 list as well. Tomie De Paola is the artist who can rightfully claim to be the children's choice for the last two years. On this year's list his books are as diversified as the beautiful retelling of the little juggler's story in The Clown of God and a delightful informational book entitled The Popcorn Book.

Finally it seems necessary to comment on the literary quality of these classroom choices. Those who argue against children selecting their own books suggest that youngsters will always lean toward easy, comic book, fadish choices devoid of literary quality. This sampling of books suggests the opposite to be true. Within these fifty books can be found some of the

finest writing for juveniles today. The most talented writers and illustrators for children are found throughout the 1979 list. Children can select books that are beautifully illustrated and sensitively written. That evidence is found within these books.

In summary, what does an analysis of the picture storybooks on the 1979 Classroom Choices list tell us about what children enjoy reading?

(1) Children prefer books in which the main character confronts a problem and seeks a solution to it.

(2) They enjoy a plot that is episodic and reveals the story incident by incident.

(3) Plots that focus on characters with different points of view or characters who experience the same thing in contrasting ways are also favored.

(4) Fantasy is the preferred genre followed by realistic fiction and folktales.

(5) The favorite books often make use of animals who are given human qualities.

(6) Children select books that contain humorous characters and situations.

(7) Children have selected more of Tomie De Paola's books during the last two years than those of any other author/illustrator.

The seven conclusions are by no means chiseled in stone. With next year's list the categories might change, but one thing remains constant: as long as children tell us what they like, we owe it to them to study those preferences in our quest to create human beings who enjoy a lifetime reading habit.

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